

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS
USING REMOTELY LOCATED PARTICIPANTS
OVER A COMPUTER NETWORK

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

1 The present invention is related to conducting focus groups
2 and more particularly, conducting focus groups using remotely
3 located participants who are communicating over a computer
4 network.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 In the world of marketing, focus groups are essential tools
6 for acquiring feedback regarding new products. In particular,
7 focus groups allow companies wishing to develop, package, name or
8 test market a new product to discuss, view and/or test the new
9 product before it is made available to the public at large and
10 provide invaluable information regarding the product.

11 In traditional focus groups, a pre-screened (pre-qualified)
12 group of respondents gathers in the same room. A moderator guides
13 the group through a discussion that probes attitudes about a
14 client's proposed products or services. Client representatives
15 observe the discussion from behind a one-way mirror. Usually, a
16 video camera records the meeting so that it can be seen by others
17 who were not able to travel to the focus group site. Transcripts
18 are also created from the video tape.

1 While such traditional focus groups provide accurate
2 information, they are costly to implement. For example, if a
3 product is to be marketed on a nation-wide basis, it would be
4 critical to gather respondents from various locales throughout the
5 country since attitudes about a new product may vary due to
6 geographical considerations. As can be appreciated, this would
7 require a significant expenditure in terms of travel and lodging
8 expenses. Additionally, the site of a traditional focus group may
9 or may not be in a locale convenient to a specific client.
10 Accordingly, client representatives may have to incur travel and
11 lodging expenses as well.

12 With the advent of large scale computer networks, such as the
13 Internet, it is now much easier to link respondents electronically
14 and thus avoid a significant amount of travel expenses. NFO
15 Research, a market research giant, has recently announced a new
16 form of focus group namely, an "on-line" focus group. The NFO
17 system of on-line focus groups allows respondents from all over
18 the country to gather, electronically, while avoiding countless
19 logistical headaches.

20 Potential focus group respondents are invited by e-mail.
21 Those who accept the invitation receive a URL and a password that
22 admits them to a protected area within a website maintained by NFO
23 Research. When they arrive, a trained moderator will conduct the
24 on-line focus group over the Internet.

25 In NFO's on-line focus groups, when a question is asked of
26 the group, all of the respondents type their responses

1 simultaneously. On-line focus groups may begin with a simple
2 series of text-based questions or they may jump right in to a
3 technical discussion. Using a variety of commercially-available
4 software programs, sophisticated images can be displayed on the
5 respondent's computer screens. These images can take the form of
6 web pages, a photo slide show, storyboards of possible future
7 advertising or even three-dimensional (3-D) graphics.

8 While the NFO system of on-line focus groups does eliminate
9 some of the logistical headaches and travel expenses associated
10 with conducting focus groups, the NFO system still requires one or
11 more representation from a client to be physically located with
12 the moderator conducting the focus group. In this way, questions
13 can be added in real time to further probe a particular response.

14 Thus, even the NFO system requires some travel expenses since a
15 client representative will need to travel to a NFO Research site
16 or vice versa.

17 Accordingly, there is a need for the system and method of
18 conducting focus groups using remotely located participants,
19 including one or more moderators, one or more clients and one or
20 more respondents, who are all physically remote from each other.
21 In order to do this, such a system must allow for the
22 implementation of at least two separate chat discussions to be
23 conducted simultaneously between the three classes of focus group
24 participants to provide an electronic analog to a one-way mirror
25 segregating clients from respondents. In addition, such a system
26 must allow and prohibit participation in the different chat

1 discussions based on the class of the participant.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

2 The disclosed invention satisfies this need by providing a
3 system for conducting focus group discussions among participants
4 including at least one moderator, at least one client and at least
5 one respondent, wherein the participants are remotely located from
6 one another yet interconnected or linked so as to exchange data of
7 one or more formats. This system comprises a respondent computer
8 interface for each respondent computer. The respondent interface
9 includes a plurality of respondent chat messages provided by at
10 least one moderator and all connected respondents. The respondent
11 computer interface also prevents or blocks respondents from
12 viewing and generating client chat messages and moderator chat
13 messages. Each respondent computer also includes at least one
14 input device, which allows the respondent to input respondent chat
15 messages.

16 The system further includes a client computer interface for
17 each client computer. The client interface displays the
18 respondent chat messages and client chat messages. The client
19 chat messages are provided by the moderator and connected
20 client(s). The client computer interface also blocks the client
21 from generating respondent chat messages. Like the respondent
22 computer, each client computer also includes an input device to
23 allow each client to input client chat messages.

24 Also included in the system is a moderator computer interface

1 for each moderator computer. The moderator interface displays
2 both client chat messages and respondent chat messages, preferably
3 in client chat and moderator chat display areas or "windows",
4 respectively. Additionally, the moderator computer interface
5 allows the moderator to both view and generate respondent and
6 client chat messages. Each moderator computer further includes an
7 input device to allow moderators to input both client chat
8 messages and respondent chat messages.

9 The respondent computers, client computers and moderator
10 computers are all interfaced to each other via a computer network
11 such as the World Wide Web.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

12 These and other features and advantages of the present
13 invention will be better understood by reading the following
14 detailed description, taken together with the drawings wherein:

15 Fig. 1 is a block diagram of the system of the present
16 invention;

17 Fig. 2 is a flow diagram showing a method of selecting
18 respondents to participant in an on-line focus group;

19 Fig. 3 is a screen display showing a respondent interface
20 through which respondent chat messages are input, displayed and
21 read;

22 Fig. 4 illustrates a client display through which client chat
23 messages are input, displayed and read and where the respondent
24 chat discussion is monitored;

1 Fig. 5 illustrates one embodiment of a moderator display
2 through which client chat messages and respondent chat messages
3 are input, displayed and read;

4 Fig. 6 is an alternative embodiment of a moderator display;

5 Fig. 7 is a block diagram of one embodiment of the present
6 invention showing how simultaneous, multiple chat discussions are
7 implemented using a chat message database; and

8 Fig. 8 shows a chat message database table which includes
9 database fields useful in implementing the simultaneous chat
10 discussions.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

11 The present invention features a system 300, FIG. 1, for
12 conducting focus group discussions among participants with the
13 various participants including at least one moderator, at least
14 one client and at least one respondent. A respondent typically
15 has access to a respondent computer 302 including a respondent
16 computer interface 304, a respondent computer input device such as
17 a keyboard 306A, a mouse 306B, a microphone 306C or a camera 306D.
18 A respondent computer also includes a display device 308 such as a
19 computer monitor capable of displaying one or more "windows" or
20 display areas of information.

21 In the case of the respondent computer, the respondent
22 computer interface 304 allows the respondent (not shown) to view a
23 plurality of displayed respondent chat messages 310 which may
24 include text 310A or graphic images 310B. As will be explained in

1 greater detail below, the respondent computer interface 304
2 prevents or blocks the respondent from viewing and/or generating
3 client chat messages and moderator chat messages.

4 In a similar fashion, a client having access to a client
5 computer 320 utilizes one or more input devices 322 such as a
6 keyboard (mouse, microphone, camera, digitizing tablet, or the
7 like) to enter client chat messages through the client interface
8 324. The client interface 324 controls display of client chat
9 messages 326 to the client chat message display "window" or area
10 328 as well as controlling respondent chat messages 330 displayed
11 to respondent chat "window" display "window" or area 332. As
12 previously disclosed, either or both of the client or respondent
13 chat messages may include text or graphical representations,
14 including photographs and images.

15 Unlike the respondent interface, the client interface 324
16 allows for the display of both client and respondent chat message
17 display areas. The client interface also allows the client (not
18 shown) having access to the client computer 320 to input client
19 chat messages 326 through an input device such as keyboard 322
20 while blocking the input of respondent chat messages 330.
21 Accordingly, one or more clients having access to one or more
22 client computers 320 can communicate among themselves and to a
23 moderator but not to respondents.

24 Much like the client computer, the moderator computer 340
25 includes a display device 342 such as a computer monitor which,
26 controlled by a moderator computer interface 344, can display at

1 least the first window or display area 346 containing client chat
2 messages 348 (such as text or graphical information); a respondent
3 chat message area or "window" 350 containing respondent chat
4 message text or graphical information 352 as well as a moderator
5 control area 354.

6 Like a client, a moderator may view both client chat messages
7 and respondent chat messages. Unlike a client, however, a
8 moderator may send both client chat messages and respondent chat
9 messages using one or more methods including a proper selection of
10 the control panel 354 to select other text entered by an input
11 device 356 such as a keyboard, or be sent as a chat message,
12 hyperlink or image destined for the client chat message "window"
13 and/or the respondent chat message window. The moderator
14 interface 344 then controls transmission of the chat messages to
15 other participants of the focus group.

16 A feature of the present invention is the fact that all
17 participants are located remotely from one another and are
18 interconnected or linked by means of a network 360 that is a local
19 area network (LAN), wide area network (WAN) the internet (World
20 Wide Web) or other computer or interconnection network.

21 The present invention also preferably includes a system
22 server 370, interconnected to the computer network 360 and other
23 participants, including one or more databases such as a chat
24 message database 372 as will be explained in greater detail below.

25 In order to conduct a focus group in an on-line environment,
26 a plurality of respondents must be gathered. Fig. 2 shows a method

1 of obtaining and selecting potential respondents to participate in
2 an on-line focus group according to the principles of the present
3 invention. First, potential respondents access a website provided
4 by the focus group provider and complete a respondent
5 questionnaire, step 10. The information gathered from the
6 potential respondents is then included in a respondent database,
7 step 20, which is maintained by the focus group provider.

8 When a client wishes to conduct an on-line focus group, the
9 client establishes respondent qualifications, which are directed
10 at obtaining a suitable sample of potential respondents, step 30.
11 The focus group provider then searches the information maintained
12 in the respondent database and pre-qualifies those respondents who
13 meet the client established respondent qualifications, step 40.

14 When a suitable number of pre-qualified potential respondents
15 are identified, the pre-qualified potential respondents are
16 invited to respond to a screening survey, step 45. This is
17 accomplished by e-mailing the pre-qualified potential respondents
18 a screening survey, which further qualifies the pre-qualified
19 potential respondents based on exact screening specifications
20 established by a client. The screening survey also validates the
21 information provided by the pre-qualified potential respondents
22 provided in step 10, above.

23 Successfully screened, pre-qualified potential respondents
24 are invited to participate in an on-line focus group via an e-mail
25 message, step 50. Those who do not pass the screening step are
26 returned to the database for possible selection for participation

1 in future focus group sessions.

2 The e-mail message sent to each successfully screened,
3 potential respondent includes the date and time for the particular
4 focus group, as well as a chat room ID and a password, which will
5 allow the potential respondents to access the designated focus
6 group chat room and participate in the focus group. Then, at the
7 designated date and time, respondents log into the designated chat
8 room using the password they received via the e-mail message, step
9 60. After sign in, each respondent may, if desired, be re-
10 qualified to verify the respondent's pre-qualification attributes,
11 step 70. As long as the re-qualification is acceptable, then the
12 respondent may participate in the designated on-line focus group,
13 step 80.

14 If, on the other hand, a potential respondent is not
15 qualified to participate, the respondent will be denied entry or
16 ejected from the focus group chat room. However, the information
17 regarding all non-qualified potential respondents is maintained in
18 the database for future focus groups, step 90.

19 Turning now to Fig. 3, a respondent interface 160 is shown.
20 As indicated above, respondents who are invited to participate in
21 an on-line focus group enter a designated chat room provided by
22 the focus group provider. In the preferred embodiment, the chat
23 rooms are implemented using the Internet (World-Wide-Web), and are
24 accessed using any one of a number of commercially-available web
25 browsers, such as Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape
26 Navigator. The respondent interface 160 appears as a standard web

1 chat room and requires no special hardware or software other than
2 a computer and World-Wide-Web browser suitable for accessing the
3 focus group provider website.

4 When a respondent successfully logs into the designated chat
5 room, a respondent display 162 is provided, wherein a plurality of
6 respondent chat messages 168 are displayed in a series fashion
7 known as a "chat discussion" or "chat thread". In order to post
8 respondent chat messages, a respondent uses at least one
9 respondent input device, such as a keyboard, mouse or microphone
10 to type respondent chat messages. When chat messages are typed,
11 they appear in the active respondent message window 164. Upon
12 selection of the "send" button 166, the message input into the
13 active respondent message window is transmitted to the on-line
14 focus group provider and is subsequently displayed as a next
15 message in the list of messages 168. The manner by which this is
16 accomplished will be discussed in more detail below. Each
17 respondent chat message includes the name of the respondent
18 posting the message and the chat message itself.

19 In addition, as will be discussed in more detail below, a
20 moderator, who leads the respondent chat discussion may post
21 graphics for display in the message window 162 to solicit
22 respondent responses. Of course, the principles of the present
23 invention are equally applicable to audio and video files as well.

24 Turning now to Fig. 4, a client interface 180 is shown. The
25 client interface 180 is divided into two display areas or
26 "windows". The first window is a client chat message window 182.

1 The second window is a respondent message window 190.

2 The respondent message window 190 allows a client viewing the
3 client interface 180 to view all of the respondent chat messages
4 exchanged between the focus group moderator and the plurality of
5 respondents. In other words, the respondent chat message window
6 190 provided in the client interface 180 mirrors or mimics the
7 respondent chat message window 162 of Fig. 3.

8 In the client chat message window 182, a list of client chat
9 messages 184 is displayed. Client chat messages are displayed in
10 a sequential fashion similar to the display of respondent chat
11 messages in the respondent chat message window 190. Client chat
12 messages are generated by clients and moderators but not by
13 respondents, who may only generate respondent chat messages, as
14 indicated above.

15 In order to enter a client chat message, the client inputs a
16 client chat message using an input device, such as a keyboard,
17 mouse or microphone. The client chat message then appears in the
18 active client chat message window 186. Upon selection of the
19 client chat message "send" button 188, the client chat message
20 displayed in the active client chat message window 186 will be
21 transmitted to the focus group provider and will be subsequently
22 displayed in the client chat message discussion list 184 to all
23 clients and moderators, but not respondents.

24 The client chat message window 182 and respondent chat
25 message window 190 are divided by the divider 192, which provides
26 the electronic analog of the one-way mirror utilized in

1 traditional focus groups. While a client may monitor the
2 respondent chat message discussion, he or she may only participate
3 in the client chat discussion. Clients are not permitted to
4 participate in the respondent chat discussion and respondents are
5 unaware of the client chat messages. Therefore, any client chat
6 messages input will only be posted in the client chat message
7 window 182.

8 However, as with traditional focus groups, by monitoring the
9 chat messages provided by the respondents participating in an on-
10 line focus group, a client may alter or modify the direction of
11 the focus group or suggest additional questions and/or information
12 to be provided to the respondent. This is accomplished by
13 inputting a client chat message, which is directed to the focus
14 group moderator.

15 Also provided on the client interface 180 are client log and
16 respondent log selection icons 194 and 196, respectively, which
17 allow a client to print out or download a log of all of the
18 messages posted in the client chat message window as well as all
19 of the messages posted in the respondent chat message window. At
20 the end of the on-line focus group, the client would exit by
21 selecting the exit icon 198.

22 Fig. 5 shows a first embodiment of a moderator interface 200.

23 As indicated above, an on-line focus group moderator guides a
24 group of respondents through a focus group. At the same time, the
25 moderator interacts with one or more clients. Thus, in a manner
26 similar to the client interface, the moderator interface 200

1 includes a client chat message window 210 and a respondent chat
2 message window 220. Thus, the moderator can monitor both the
3 client chat message discussion 212 and the respondent chat message
4 discussion 222.

5 However, unlike the respondents, who may only participate in
6 the respondent chat discussion, and the clients, who may only
7 participate in the client chat discussion, a moderator may
8 participate in both discussions. Accordingly, the moderator
9 interface 200 provides a means by which a moderator may post
10 messages to either the client chat message window 210 or the
11 respondent chat message window 220.

12 In the embodiment of Fig. 5, this is accomplished using a
13 single moderator message window 230. The moderator message window
14 230 allows the moderator to input messages using an input device,
15 such as a keyboard, in an active message window 232. In addition,
16 a moderator may select a hyperlink to send to either the client
17 chat discussion or the respondent chat discussion using hyperlink
18 window 234. Furthermore, images may be sent to either the client
19 discussion window or the respondent discussion window using image
20 selection window 236.

21 Each of the message, hyperlink and image selection windows
22 includes a send icon 233, 235 and 237, respectively, which are
23 selected to send the message, hyperlink or image to the desired
24 chat message window. The client chat message window 210 will be
25 selected by selecting the client chat message window radio button
26 238, which is also provided in the moderator message window 230.

1 On the other hand, if a message, hyperlink or image is desired to
2 be transmitted to the respondent chat message window 220, then the
3 respondent radio button 240 is selected.

4 Like the client interface 180 (Fig. 4), the moderator
5 interface 200 includes client and respondent log selection icons
6 242 and 244. Also provided is a toggle icon 246. Selecting the
7 toggle icon alternatively selects between the two available
8 moderator displays, i.e. the displays shown in Figs. 5 and 6.
9 Upon the completion of a focus group, a moderator exits the focus
10 group by selecting the exit icon 248.

11 Fig. 6 shows a second embodiment of a client interface 200a.

12 Like the first embodiment mentioned above, this embodiment of the
13 moderator interface 200a includes a client chat message window 210
14 and a respondent chat message window 220. The remaining features
15 indicated in Fig. 5, which use common reference numbers to those
16 features identified and described above with respect to Fig. 5,
17 operate in a like manner and will not be described again here.
18 However, this embodiment of the moderator interface 200a differs
19 in that it provides two moderator message windows.

20 The first moderator message window 230c is a moderator
21 message window wherein client chat messages may be entered. In a
22 manner similar to that described above, messages, hyperlinks and
23 images may be input using message hyperlink and image windows
24 232c, 234c, and 236c, respectively. Although not shown in Fig. 6,
25 "send" buttons for each of the above are provided and may be
26 unobscured using scroll bar 239c.

1 The second moderator message window 230r mirrors the message,
2 hyperlink and image windows and "send" buttons provided with
3 respect to the first moderator message window 230c. However, the
4 second moderator message window 230r is dedicated to the input of
5 respondent chat messages. Respondent chat messages may include
6 text messages input into respondent message window 232r,
7 hyperlinks selected in hyperlink message window 234r or images,
8 selected in image selection window 236r. Again, a scroll bar 239r
9 is provided to unobscure additional buttons, such as the "send"
10 buttons associated with messages, hyperlink and images,
11 respectively.

12 In one preferred embodiment, the client chat message
13 discussion and the respondent chat message discussion are
14 implemented using a single database 100 (Fig. 7). In this manner,
15 a plurality of respondents 110a through 110n may input respondent
16 chat messages and transmit the same to database 100, where they
17 will be stored. In a similar manner, a plurality of clients, 120a
18 through 120n may input client chat messages, which are then
19 transmitted to database 100. One or more moderator 130a through
20 130n may input either respondent chat messages or client chat
21 messages, which are also transmitted and stored in database 100.

22 Turning now to Fig. 8, a database table 140 is shown. The
23 database table 140 includes a number of fields including a message
24 ID field 142, a project number field 144, a user name field 146, a
25 privileges field 148, and a message field 150. The message IDs
26 are numbered sequentially as messages are transmitted to the

1 database 100 from respondents, moderators, and clients. Since
2 each respondent, client and moderator is assigned to participate
3 in a specific focus group, the messages must also be assigned to a
4 particular discussion. This is accomplished by assigning a
5 project number to each participant, which is maintained in the
6 project number field 144.

7 In the example shown, message IDs 1, 2, and 3 are all related
8 to the same project number, 123. However, as can be appreciated,
9 a single database may maintain messages related to a plurality of
10 different focus groups by using different project numbers
11 associated with different message IDs.

12 Each message also includes the user name, which is maintained
13 in user name field 146. Thus, whenever a message is posted to
14 either the client or respondent chat message window, the name of
15 the originator of the message is posted so that the various
16 participants know who has provided the input.

17 The privileges field 148 is used to dictate which chat
18 message windows a specific participant may access. For example,
19 clients may only post messages to the client chat message window.
20 In a similar manner, respondents may only post messages to the
21 respondent chat message window. However, a moderator may post
22 messages to both the client chat message window and the respondent
23 chat message window. Therefore, each chat message originating
24 from a moderator must include an entry in the privileges field to
25 indicate where the particular message is to be directed. This is
26 accomplished using the features provided in the moderator

1 interface, which are used to send messages.

2 Finally, the actual message input, which may be a text
3 message, a hyperlink or an image file is stored in the message
4 field 150. Using a database structure, multiple, simultaneous
5 chat discussions may be provided, which are critical to the
6 implementation of the on-line focus group when all of the
7 participants including respondents, clients and moderators may be
8 located remotely from each other.

9 Accordingly, the present invention provides a system and
10 method for conducting focus groups where the participants,
11 including at least one client, at least one moderator and at least
12 one respondent, may participate in a focus group even if all of
13 the respondents are remotely located from each other. Thus, the
14 logistical headaches and expenses realized using traditional focus
15 groups are eliminated.

16 Modifications and substitutions by one of ordinary skill in
17 the art are considered to be within the scope of the present
18 invention, which is not to be limited except by the claims which
19 follow.

20 What is claimed is: